

Wanted: A Community of Practice for Senior Public Relations Practitioners

The gap between PR theory and practice is not always easily bridged. How self-aware are senior practitioners and how much do they interrogate their thinking when making decisions? By Jacquie L'Etang and Mandy Powell.



Beyond Competence: Concepts, criticality and expertise

In a previous Thought Leadership article (Gorpe, S, February 2013), Dr Serra Gorpe, Professor of Communications at Istanbul University wrote 'I still have a hard time explaining to students and people from the general public what exactly we do'. She is not the first academic or practitioner to articulate this challenge. The interesting question is 'Why?' And this is where our recent work at Queen Margaret University in Scotland has focused.

We have been working on a project that explores thinking practices among senior public relations practitioners in Scotland (L'Etang & Powell, 2013). As part of our research, we have been trying to understand how public relations practitioners draw upon knowledge and experience in order to operationalise higher level expertise in the moment.

Our interest has focused on learning processes and the exploration of techniques by which practitioners can be made aware of their thinking routines in work. We have been intrigued to explore how practitioners may learn to interrogate their own thinking tools with a view to the development of greater autonomy and independence that is commensurate with professional status.

In this context, the relationship between academic knowledges and professional practices raises interesting questions about the relationship between two different types of concept: abstract disciplinary concepts and concrete everyday instances. What are the higher order concepts that give shape to Public Relations as an academic discipline and how might these articulate with the everyday life and work of senior practice?

The tradition of the 'reflective practitioner' (Schon, 1983) gained currency in the 1980s but research suggested the gap between theory and practice was not easily overcome. Practitioners drew on the personal and the general as the basis for professional judgment rather than specialist theoretical knowledge and our research findings confirm this.

If professional judgment is defined as "those expert guesses which result from combining experience with specialist theoretical knowledge", (Tripp, 1993) it is important to understand how those two domains, practice and theory, articulate with each other and are developed.

In asking such questions we seek to explore the degree to which practitioners are self-aware in their working decisions and the underpinning concepts and principles by which they work. This self-consciousness combined with a willingness to question and reflect upon work in progress is defined as 'critical reflexivity' and offers the capacity to transform both practice and practitioner. Critical reflexivity involves practitioners in an analysis of their thoughts and actions from outside the moment in which they find themselves.

This offers the capacity to access critical and creative conceptual tools from a broader set of resources that facilitate a deeper level of analysis. In a rapidly changing media and communications landscape, the ability to make wise decisions in constitutive moments is enhanced by such a capacity.

When learning about practice is clearly framed by higher order disciplinary concepts defining the field of study it puts in place a crucial first step in the development of critically reflexive Public Relations practitioners. If learning about practice becomes constrained by the concrete everyday instances, the substantive everyday first-order concepts operationalising the industry, such as the writing of a press release or organisational mission statement, or the evaluation of impact using quantitative measures of media coverage, the opportunity to develop critical reflexivity may be compromised.

This is not to say that the acquisition, crafting and updating of first-order substantive everyday concepts is not important. For Public Relations novices, the development of competent professional practice is, in part, dependent upon these skills. However, the pressing question for our research at Queen Margaret University (QMU) in Scotland, relates to the development of practitioners beyond technical competence.

On the continuum between novice and expert, the competent professional is positioned at the midway point (Edwards, 2010). Whilst professional bodies such as CIPR and PRCA in the UK can scaffold the gap between academia and industry, between second and first order concepts, at early stages on that continuum, how to progress toward autonomous expert professional is less apparent. How is the development of 'senior' Public Relations practice and its practitioners recognised and supported?

Desperately Seeking Seniority: Identifying and supporting senior practice

The ECOSPI report defines competence as "the combination of skills, knowledge and personal attributes that leads to superior performance for practitioners" (p5). The identification of knowledge, skills, personal attributes and competences is useful in terms of identifying gaps in knowledge and skills, such as research methods or social media, on the novice to expert continuum. However, if we consider Edwards' conceptualisation of expert practice, the model is less helpful for the professional development of senior practitioners.

Public Relations in the UK continues to evolve as a professional project (Piecza & L'Etang, 2001, 2006, L'Etang, 2004) and the current ubiquity of its practice presents a number of methodological challenges for research. Firstly, how do we locate and engage with the community we want to research?

Senior practitioners might be recognised by the contexts in which they work, by job titles as diverse as Director, Fundraising and Marketing Manager, Head of Public Policy and Corporate Affairs, Communications and Engagement Director or Head of Public Affairs. Senior practitioners might also be recognised by the social, cultural or economic capitals (Bourdieu, 1990) mobilised by the agency, organisation, institution or sector in which they are located. On the other hand, the identification of senior practitioners might be measured in terms of the social and cultural capitals they are able to mobilise as individuals (Edwards, 2008, 2010; Ihlen, 2005, 2007; L'Etang, 2013).

If, however, senior practice is a more complex and autonomous phenomenon, as suggested in the literature about expert professional practice, what are the other ways we might be able to think about it? Moreover, what models of professional development do we need to put in place to be able to develop and support the learning it demands? How are expert practices and expert practitioners made visible? What is the nature of the knowledges and practices common to 'seniority' and is it possible to identify a community of practice?

The Professional Body as Community of Practice: Fit for purpose?

QMU funded a six-month pilot research project designed to explore some of the issues these questions raise. Underpinning the project are the outputs of Pieczka (2002, 2006, 2007), Pieczka & L'Etang (2001, 2006) and L'Etang (1999, 2002, 2004, 2008). Formulated as a step toward a more substantial mapping of public relations in Scotland and the role it plays in society, the project was supported by QMU's Public Relations industry advisory panel and CIPR and PRCA Scotland.

The two professional bodies are headquartered in London but practitioners in Scotland have the benefit of an office and officials in closer proximity because of the particularities of UK constitutional arrangements. The project was funded as a knowledge exchange activity involving senior Public Relations practitioners located in a range of contexts including agencies of varying size, specialist and generalist, in-house corporate and in-house public and third sector. Adopting a qualitative approach, the research was informed by three phases: focus groups and in-depth semi-structured interviews with a self-identified sample followed by a series of individual learning interventions and follow-ups.

Lave and Wenger (1991 & 1998) re-frame learning as a social process requiring participation, initially peripheral but becoming increasingly and complexly engaged in communities of practice. Importantly, Lave and Wenger shift the emphasis away from the transmission of facts and information towards a focus on the interrelatedness and inextricability of practice, person and social world.

For these scholars, the focus for learning becomes the communities of practice an individual forms in shared enterprise over time. Where are the communities of practice senior Public Relations professionals participate in and learn from? How do those communities of practice co-create the higher order thinking tools required to bring everyday concrete experience into dialogue with disciplinary knowledge and effect social transformation? More importantly, what are the conditions and tools that scaffold the qualitative change required for the shift from competent to senior practice?

The Restlessness of Becoming: Never fully formed?

Our research with a self-selected sample of senior Public Relations practitioners found the absence of clearly articulated professional development pathways that move beyond competence frustrated practitioners' efforts to render their learning progression, and seniority thus, visible. Anxieties about how to conceptualise the value of their practice were commonplace. Public Relations has been described as a "maturing discipline" (ECOPSI, 2013) but it might be more useful to think about it as a 'becoming' academic discipline (Goodson, 1981). Where on the trajectory of 'becoming' might Public Relations be located? This question is important to our understanding of the efficacy of knowledge and experience and what counts as 'senior practice'. The final stage in the evolution of an academic subject is its 'mythologisation', the public recognition of its value as a societal good. One of the milestones along the way may be the development of critically reflexive practice and practitioners.

Thought Leader Profile

Dr Jacquie L'Etang is Chair of Public Relations and Applied Communication at Queen Margaret University, Scotland. Her main academic interests are public relations professionalism and professionalisation, histories of public relations and the role of public relations in society. She has authored three books, co-edited three books and is author of numerous articles and book chapters. She is co-editor of the international academic journal *Public Relations Inquiry*.

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Previous research experiences have included working as a Research Officer on a three year ESRC-funded media literacy project led by Professor David Buckingham and based at the University of London. Following this, Mandy worked as a Research Officer on a knowledge exchange project based in the School of Social, Geographical and Political Science at the University of Loughborough.

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